

1.1 GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Online readings accessed through the G380 website, such as this initial introduction, will serve as your basic texts for the course. They will form the background for classroom lectures, but lectures and discussions will not be confined to reviewing the reading; much of the information in the readings will not be repeated in class. You should read productively to absorb the main points of information – *Study Questions* at the end of most of the readings can help you do this, and you should turn to them as you read. Articles that you will read and summarize in your *Reading Journal*, the major writing assignment of the course, will provide perspectives beyond the view of your text materials.

G380 will be organized in three sections. The first section, roughly half the term, will focus on Classical China, or the period usually dated from 722 to 221 B.C. In addition to surveying the general contours of society, political history, and intellectual life during this period, we will pay special attention to Classical China's beliefs about its origins in the past and its prospects for the future.

As you will see, China's Classical age was a tumultuous era, filled with the dangers of constant civil war, political disruptions, and unpredictable social change. The intellectual elite of that period, who are the authors of all the textual records of that time, were anxious to search the past looking for political and ethical models that could help them extricate society from this era of crisis and chaos. The human past was for them as promising a field of study as the world of the natural sciences much later became for the West. At the same time, there was an urgent desire to make out a glimpse of the future, an almost millennial urge to see a new age of order emerge. These interests in history and the millennium were connected because the literate elite looked to the past as the key to their future.

Once we have seen something of the Classical concept of the human past and future, we will then look at these from another angle. First, we will use materials discovered or collected only in recent times to obtain an independent, and hopefully more objective, view of the distant past in China – the past that actually lay behind the Classical era. We will then have an opportunity to compare the past imagined by the people of the Classical age with this more “scientifically” constructed version, and ask what the differences and similarities are, and how these may be significant.

Finally, we will study the “future” – the century that followed the close of the Classical era. In doing so, we will have the opportunity to see how far events diverged from what earlier people imagined. We will also see how the people of the “future” tried to believe that they were fulfilling the hopes of their Classical ancestors.

Online readings are designed to illustrate as much as possible the history of the Classical period in contemporary texts. Most readings include either verbatim texts or summaries of textual narratives. In addition, there are many interpretive comments interspersed. These remarks will allow us to reduce in the time allotted to lectures in class increase time for questions and discussions.

On the next few pages, we will survey some basic facts about Chinese geography, society, history, and language.

General Features of Ancient China

1. The Land

Contemporary China embraces a large and diverse territory, stretching from the western coast of the Pacific Ocean to the deserts of Central Asia, and from the northern steppes to tropical forests in the south. Altogether, the size of China is roughly equal to that of the United States. During the earliest periods that we will cover in this course, roughly 1200 B.C. or the early Bronze Age, the territories dominated by what we now call “Chinese” culture and political structures was much smaller: perhaps as little as a tenth the size of today’s People’s Republic of China. But the territory covered by China during the latest period of our course was approximately equal to China’s current extent – areas such as Tibet still lay outside the Chinese sphere, but substantial portions of modern Korea and Vietnam lay within it.

The topography of early China – the land forms that shaped the Chinese state – had an enormous influence on the shape of Chinese history. The principal nature of this influence was to isolate China from the other great cultural centers of the world.

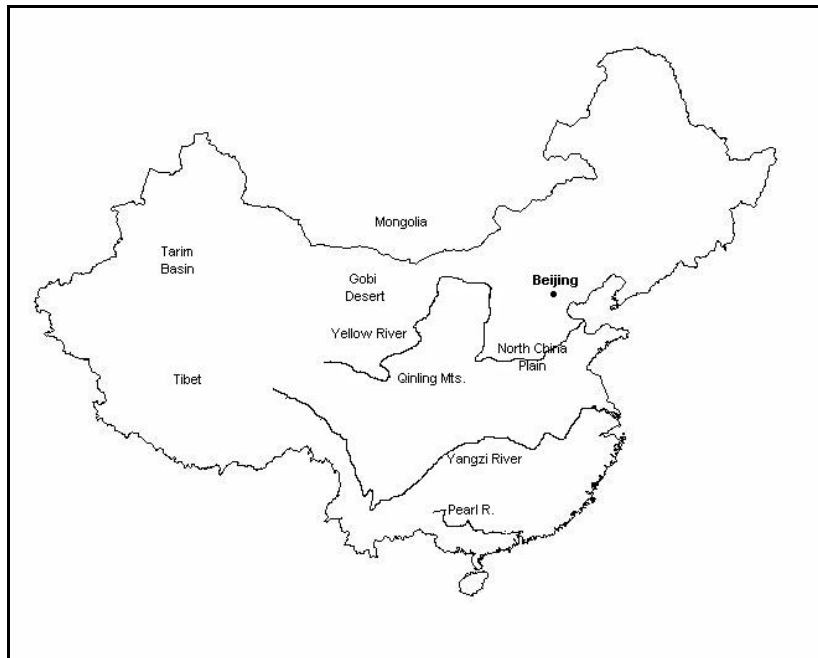
The earliest concentrations of the culture we now call Chinese appeared in the valley of the Yellow River, on what we call the North China Plain. To the east, the Pacific Ocean presented a nearly insurmountable barrier to expansion or exploration; in the west, the Central Asian deserts, Tibetan Plateau, and Tianshan Mountains isolated China from the great civilizations of Mesopotamia, although some cultural diffusion may have penetrated these barriers upon occasion. To the north, the Gobi Desert closed China in upon itself, and the steppes, inhabited by nomad tribes, were inhospitable domains for the agricultural society of China. Only to the south were there fertile lands that invited expansion, but the uneven topography of these areas and the sparsely populated jungles that originally covered them made expansion slow. Moreover, even as these lands were settled, the denser jungles of Southeast Asia and the wall of the Himalayas ensured that China would not come into direct contact with the well developed cultures of the Indian subcontinent.

As a result of these natural barriers, the people of ancient China grew up in a world where their own culture not only dominated the cultures of surrounding peoples, but seemed to be virtually the only culture in existence. Although the nomad peoples to the north and west possessed sophisticated social and political patterns well suited to their economic needs, their living style did not appear to the Chinese as possessing any of the features which they had come to associate with civilization: agricultural settlement, urban centers of market, political, and religious activity, and literacy. The diverse peoples who lived in scattered settlements towards the east coast and in the forests of the south appeared even less advanced than the nomads. The Chinese, with none of the comparative perspectives available to Mediterranean cultures, saw themselves as a divine anomaly – what force could have brought forth so unique and perfect a civilization other than Heaven itself?



Map 1: Relief image of China

Within its relatively secure boundaries, China's geography was diverse. The territory of ancient China was dominated by two great river valleys. In the north, where Chinese civilization seems first to have developed, there flowed the Yellow River. The character of the Yellow River basin was the product of the Central Asian deserts far to the west. Over many millennia, western winds blew the sands of these deserts over the upper and middle reaches of the Yellow River valley. These deposits, called "loess" (*low-ess*) gradually rose into high plateaus, fertile, but easily eroded into a landscape of steep escarpments. The river itself carried the sandy soil of these areas towards the east, taking on a muddy color which the Chinese classed as "yellow."



Map 2: Rivers and Other Features

As the Yellow River flowed east, the silt it carried gradually raised it out of its original banks. Consequently, it flowed over the North China Plain as a broad shallow band, ideal for irrigation and fertilization of the neighboring crop land, but subject to disastrous flooding. The river actually has no natural bed as it crosses the North China Plain, and has more than once shifted course so radically that its mouth has been moved hundreds of miles.

To the south, separated from the Yellow River by the steep Qinling Mountains, lay the valley of the Yangzi River. The Yangzi was far friendlier than the Yellow River. It was deeper, thus more navigable, and it was fed by numberless smaller rivers and streams which could facilitate irrigation and transportation. Ultimately the center of Chinese civilization would shift towards the mouth of the Yangzi, where cities like Nanjing and Shanghai now stand. But in ancient China these lands were still sparsely inhabited, although some major cultural centers developed there after the middle of the first millennium B.C.

Between the colder, dryer basin of the Yellow River and the warm, humid Yangzi Valley were a number of other important river valleys along which settlements of Chinese culture flourished. These included most prominently the Huai and Han Rivers, and also the smaller River Luo, which joined the Yellow River near the North China Plain, as well as the Wei River, just at the Yellow River's great elbow bend to the north.

2. The Family

If one were to set out to demonstrate that early Chinese society possessed all the main features characteristic of early Western societies, it is possible that it could be done. Chinese society was regionally diverse with a wide variety of distinct local styles, and individual cases may probably be found to illustrate most any set of patterns or values. But taken on the whole, ancient Chinese social patterns appear strikingly different from those of the West. This is particularly true if by "the West" we mean the modern West, with which we are best acquainted. While it is certainly more valid to compare ancient China to ancient Rome rather than to Indiana or Ohio, still, when we wish to grasp the character of ancient China it is its distance from ourselves that we need to understand – and it is distant indeed.

The fundamental unit of ancient Chinese society was the family. While it was as clear to the Chinese as to us that people come packaged individually, the perspectives of ancient China seem to have laid great stress on the fact that the individual human, at birth, was not much more than a biological animal fit only for crying and feeding, while immersion in the culture of the family transformed this infant into a fully "human" being, possessing manners and feelings for others. What the individual person drew from the family seemed so far greater than what he or she brought to the family that the individual self truly did not seem fully detachable from the family context within which it had been nurtured to maturity.

Moreover in a society of agricultural subsistence, such as ancient China's, it was almost impossible for the ordinary individual to survive outside the context of the family's socio-economic system. The family was a factory – the men raising food and providing shelter, the women growing silkworms for fabric and providing clothes – the interdependence of the family members was far greater than we might initially think.

In such a context, the place of the individual in society tended to be conceived in terms of *responsibilities rather than rights*. Larger social groupings, the village, town, and state, were granted far greater powers over the individual than would be tolerable in the modern West. These larger units were generally conceived on the model of the family. The king or emperor of China was called the Son of Heaven, drawing great respect by association with his august “kinsman,” and he was also called “the Father and Mother of the People,” providing him with unmatched authority.

The authority of the parent was, in fact, the strongest force within ancient Chinese society (and remained so into this century). No traditional value could, in practice, supersede the value of “*filiality*,” that is, reverence for and obedience to one’s parents. And among parents, the father was supreme. Although there is some evidence that China was at one time in prehistory dominated by matrilineal tribes, patriarchal structures were firmly established by the dawn of the historical era. The family name, or surname (which precedes the personal name in Chinese, perhaps symbolizing the priority of family over individual), was passed through the male line. Married women effectively entered the families of their husbands and were “lost” to their natal families. While it is true that virtually all elaborate traditional cultures in world history were controlled by men at the great expense of women, China was probably worse than most in its treatment of women, who were often viewed as little more than commodities.

The extreme sexism of ancient China will seem deplorable to most modern Westerners, and certainly, it should be clearly acknowledged. However, ancient China cannot now be changed, and in this course we will not dwell overmuch on this aspect, except perhaps to note unanticipated aspects in which women may have been viewed or treated differently, or escaped somewhat the constraints placed on them. When discussing political activities, ethical ideals, and so forth, it will be pointless to employ the non-sexist language of “his or her,” “he or she.” Admirable ideal types, sages and rulers, will always be male, even in the abstract; it’s too bad, but to ascribe non-sexist ideas to the literate elite of ancient China would be a distortion.

The status of individuals in China, particularly prior to the latter Classical era, was largely dependent on the status of their families. Wealthy and powerful families (who belonged to a class we call the “*patricians*”) generally achieved and perpetuated their status by belonging to larger kinship organizations, generally called “*clans*.” Most Chinese, and all members of the patrician elite, were highly conscious of their place within a large lineage group with complicated branch features (in many cases too complicated for later analysts to figure out!). These groups were joined and distinguished through a complex religious system of ancestral sacrifice.

Every patrician lineage traced its ancestry back to some “founding” progenitor who was worshiped at a shrine in his honor. Worship consisted principally of scheduled offerings of food and drink, and in complex ceremonies surrounding the sacrificial offering. The ancestor’s spirit was pictured as materially present in some form at these sacrifices, and the sustenance of the food and drink was real. Ancestors needed descendants to sustain them in their spirit form (although it was occasionally noticed that the ancestors never cleaned their plates). In addition to worshiping the founding ancestor, clan members would worship the eldest male members of recent generations and their wives as well.

Eldest sons carried seniority within such a system; younger sons frequently became “founding ancestors” of junior or “cadet” branches of the lineage. These various lineage branches would then share some levels of ritual activities and not others. These graded ritual groups constituted collectives of social, economic, and political power in ancient China. *Kinship was a powerful social tool.*

But kinship was more than a matter of birth, it could also be forged through marriage. China was relentlessly “exogamous”: that is, two people of the same surname could not marry no matter how distant their relation, even if there was no known relation at all. A marriage was first and foremost a contract between two independent corporate groups. For this reason, the selection of marriage partners was always viewed as a family rather than as an individual matter. Love and romance were well known phenomena, but largely separate from marriage. Marriages were arranged by the parents so as to yield the greatest benefit to the extended family; the bride and groom were often not even consulted before the engagement. The divorce rate was low.

The political nature of marriage lay behind the “polygamous” nature of Chinese society. Men of wealth and status not only could afford to support more than one wife, they remained in demand even after marrying several women because they continued to be viewed principally as sources of power and patronage, rather than as sources of loyal affection. From the point of view of women, being one of a group of wives and “*concubines*” (secondary mates) was not only inherently demeaning, it fostered bitter competition. Only one woman could be designated as the “principal wife,” whose son would be the principal heir, but that designation could be shifted by the husband at any time. In wealthy families, this made for a grisly psychology, and in high political circles where a throne was at stake it made assassination a popular sport.

3. Religion

As we have mentioned, the religious system of ancestor worship was central to Chinese society. It served to articulate the lineage relationships through which flowed all wealth and power. Ancestor worship was based on the religious belief in the existence of spirits (a very corporal form of existence) and of the continued efficacy of ancestral spirits to bring good fortune to their living descendants. The ceremonies of the ancestor cult had a powerful effect on the social psychology of the participants, yet this form of religion was very different from what we often mean by religion in the West. There does not seem to have been much in the way of individual or personalized prayer: one spoke to the ancestors through the thick context of a ritual script, calling attention to the bounty of the offerings, perhaps flattering the spirits with a spoken or written list of their exaggerated accomplishments and virtues, and asking for a standard list of blessings, most important the gift of many sons, so that one could oneself look forward to being flattered and fed long after death. The entire system was more ceremonial than spiritual.

But Chinese religion existed on a number of other levels. A state cult, revolving around the king or emperor and the supreme deity Tian (whose title we shall generally render as “Heaven”) provided powerful political legitimacy for the rulers of China, and was articulated through a series of local rituals that brought ordinary people into contact with the state religion.

At the other end of the spectrum, a vivid and wildly unsystematic population of ghosts, demons, local deities, animal spirits, and shamanic mediums staffed a rich kingdom of superstitious religion, the rites for which were practiced at small local shrines throughout the land. This seems to be where the ancient Chinese people displayed their greatest “spirituality,” and it appears to have been a very charged form indeed.

4. Contours of Ancient History

The Chinese have traditionally conceived their history in terms of their rulers. More specifically, since the royal throne was normally handed down from father to son, the Chinese have spoken of their past in terms of “dynastic eras,” periods of time during which a single lineage occupied the throne.

The earliest dynasty for which we have certain historical evidence is known as the Shang Dynasty (sometimes referred to as the Yin Dynasty). The Shang Dynasty probably began about 1600 B.C. and endured until about the year 1045.

Note: Since virtually all the material covered in G380 pertains to years prior to A.D. 1, you should assume that all dates are B.C. This will not always be specified. If an A.D. date is mentioned, that *will* always be specified. Thus, 1045 refers to 1045 B.C.

The Shang Dynasty was succeeded by the Zhou Dynasty (Zhou is pronounced like the name “Joe”), which lasted a very long time (1045-256, although the latter date is often listed as 221, the year that a successor dynasty was formally installed). Because Zhou history is so long and diverse, the chronology of the Zhou is usually conceived as a succession of periods:

Western Zhou (1045-771)

Eastern Zhou (770-221)

Spring and Autumn Period (722-453)

Warring States Period (453-221)

|| These two periods are what

|| we will term “Classical China”

You may encounter variant dates for these periods in your outside readings – different writers have different criteria for demarcating them, and there is actually considerable controversy about the date of the Zhou conquest of the Shang.

The Chinese of the Classical period believed that prior to the Shang Dynasty there had been a long dynasty called the Xia (pronounced close to *sha*). Earlier yet, there had been a succession of “sage rulers” – some taking the throne by hereditary succession, others by virtue of their semi-divine merit. Although we will not treat these pre-Shang rulers as historical in this course, we will consider at some length their significance to the Classical vision of history.

The Zhou Dynasty actually lost effective power in 771, and the succeeding 52 centuries – the Classical era – were a period of political fragmentation and social chaos, resembling in some ways the situation in Europe during the Dark Ages after the fall of Rome. In the Chinese case, however, social disruption led not to a dark age, but to an era of great social growth and intellectual activity.

The era of disunity, the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods, came to an end in 221, when the state of Qin conquered all the other states that had grown to independent status within the fragmented polity of the late Zhou. The Qin united China under a single strong government, as had been the case during the Shang and the Western Zhou.

The Qin celebrated the power of this government and of its ruler, a supreme autocrat who called himself an “Emperor” rather than a “King.” Because of this name change, we generally speak of China from the Qin until this century as “Imperial China,” while the Classical and earlier eras are termed “pre-Imperial.” The distinction makes some sense – as we will see, the nature of the Chinese state does change very dramatically after 221. However, the Zhou state was actually no less an “empire” than the Qin later became: both periods saw the rapid expansion of Chinese power into areas that were initially not part of the Chinese polity.

The Qin Dynasty was not long lived. It was unusually tyrannical in its form of autocracy and was overturned by rebellion only fifteen years after its formal founding. The successor dynasty, the Han, endured, with one interruption, for four centuries. The Western Han (or Former Han), lasted from 206 B.C. until A.D. 220, with a hiatus during years A.D. 8-23. Dramatic changes occurred during the Han, and it forms a bridge between what we may call ancient China, and what is sometimes termed “medieval China.” G380 will only carry us part way into the Han. We will close as the patterns of the ancient era fade into new structures of state and society, about the year 100 B.C.

Thus a general timeline of G380 might look like this:

| c. 1600 | 1045 | 771 722 | 453 | 221 | 206 |
|---|------|---------|-----|-----|-----|
| <hr/> | | | | | |
| Neolithic/Legendary eras . . . Xia? . . . Shang Dynasty Western Zhou Spring-Autumn Warring States Qin Early Han | | | | | |
| – Eastern Zhou or Classical Era – | | | | | |
| Pre-Imperial Period Early Imperial Period . . . | | | | | |
| <hr/> | | | | | |

5. The Chinese Language

Phonetic and grammatical features. Even those who love ancient Chinese admit that the language is bizarre and that it creates unusual difficulties for the study of China in Western languages.

We have little insight into the spoken language of ancient China. The texts we possess now are, being texts, all examples of the written language, and there is much evidence to support the view that spoken and written languages were very different in antiquity. In fact, as the Chinese cultural sphere expanded during the ancient period, it appears that many of the ethnic groups it absorbed maintained their native spoken language for many generations, and employed the Chinese written language for textual communication simply because it was the only written language available.

We are able to say that spoken ancient Chinese was largely a monosyllabic language: that is, the semantic (meaning) units of the language were almost always expressed by a single syllable. Each of these semantically significant syllables constituted a word. Words were uninflected: they did not take variable endings that indicated features such as tense, number, gender, or case. All these features, which make many Indo-European languages tedious to learn, are entirely absent from Chinese. No tense, no plurals, no subject-object markers. But it is disappointing to learn that a language stripped of all this complex features becomes not easier to master but harder. In ancient Chinese, which relies almost wholly on word order and a limited set of function words to provide grammatical clues to meaning, The level of ambiguity is spectacularly high. This is one of the reasons why many of the most revered ancient texts remain imperfectly understood.

Chinese characters. Perhaps the most striking feature of the Chinese language is its graphic form. Chinese uses no alphabet. Instead, every word is assigned a “character” which calls up both its sound and its meaning. The largest Chinese dictionaries list about 50,000 characters; a literate person needs to know about 5,000. The system of writing in characters seems to have evolved during the Shang period; the earliest surviving texts date from that era, and the characters used in these are far more rudimentary and unstandardized than those we see later.

Learning Chinese characters can be a tedious chore, but learning about them is fun. The characters can be understood as the products of several approaches to representing a word in graphic form. Characters represent words, and words may be thought of as consisting of two major components: a sound and a meaning. Characters relate to words in the following ways, as illustrated by the chart on the next page:

1. Characters may be derived from simple pictographic representations of the meaning of a word. On the chart, the first three graphs on the chart stand for the words *zi*, *mu*, and *nü*, which mean “child,” “tree,” and “woman.” The graphs do not relate to the sounds of the words, but simply derive from a crude sketch of the noun that the word refers to.

2. The second set on the chart, “ideographic forms,” shows how characters were developed for more abstract words. The characters for the low numbers convey in a simple form the meaning of the numbers (again, without regard for sound), and the graphs for “up” and “down” are also representations of abstract ideas, rather than pictures. The set of compound graphs illustrate how abstract ideas could be conveyed through characters that were combinations of pictures that pointed to a meaning beyond themselves. For example, a graph including the sun and moon did not mean “the sun and the moon,” as a pictograph would, it meant “bright,” an idea conveyed indirectly through pictures.

PRINCIPLES OF CHINESE CHARACTER FORMATION

1. PICTOGRAPHIC FORMS

子 child (ancient form: 𠂔)

日 sun (ancient form: 𠄎)

木 tree (ancient form: 𣎵)

月 moon (ancient form: 𠄎)

女 woman (ancient form 𡚰 : a kneeling figure)

2. IDEOGRAPHIC FORMS

Simple:

一 one 二 two 上 above 下 below 本 root

Complex:

好

good (woman + child)

明

bright (sun + moon)

3. EXAMPLE OF A LOGOGRAPHIC FORM

時

This is the character for *shí*, a word denoting ‘time’ or, more properly, ‘season.’ The graph combines the graph for ‘sun’ on the left with an unrelated character, *shì* 寺 on the right, which was selected solely to indicate how the character should be pronounced (during the ancient period, the element *shì* and the word for season, now pronounced *shí*, were very nearly homophonous). The left-hand element (pronounced *jīb* [like *run*] when alone) contributes only towards indicating the meaning, in that the notion of season is related to the position of the sun; the *shì* on the right (which means ‘hall’ or ‘temple’ when appearing independently) contributes only phonetic value.

(Adapted from Charles O. Hucker, *China to 1850* [Stanford, 1975])

3. The final type of character, a very common one, conveys its meaning by a combined approach to both sound and meaning. In the example given, the problem is to figure out how to represent in writing the concept of a calendrical time or season, as denoted by the spoken word *shí*. The solution is to write the character for “sun,” closely associated with time and the progression of the year, on one side, and on the other side to borrow the character for a nearly homophonous word *shì* (the meaning of which bears no relation to time). Readers then can understand the sense of the character to be a concept associated with the sun, and the pronunciation to be much like *shì* (during the Classical period, *shí* and *shì* would have been very close, being pronounced, very roughly, like *dziug* and *diug* respectively).

There are actually a number of other ways in which characters could be formed, some of them very subtle, and the manner in which characters convey meaning is a source of analysis that is both endless and unusually entertaining. Even more significant for understanding Chinese culture is the analysis of the psychological and aesthetic effects of a written language composed of graphs rather than an alphabet. After long exposure to written Chinese, the impression grows that processes of understanding occur during reading that have no comparable equivalent for alphabetic scripts. These processes, both aesthetic and more generally cultural, made the Chinese written language appear as a near-sacred gift to the people of Classical China.

Names. As you will read on the page concerning Chinese transcription systems, Chinese is a language which allows for very few possible syllables. Not counting the tonal intonations that are an integral part of each word, but do not appear in transcription, there exist only about 450 distinct syllable-sounds in Chinese.

The norm in ancient China was to have a surname of one or two syllables (one was the norm) and a personal name which followed it of one or two syllables (one was the norm, but two-syllable personal names were quite common). When Chinese names are rendered in the Roman alphabet, the result is that they tend to look very much alike. In Chinese, the characters disambiguated personal names easily, but the homogeneity of names in transcription is a special headache for Western students of China.

To make the problem of names more severe, in ancient China, individuals, particularly males, possessed a variety of personal names, nicknames, and honorific names which they acquired at different stages of life. They also acquired various titles by which they were known (the Minister of This-or-That, and so forth). A single text may refer to a particular individual by any and all of a half-dozen names in the course of a single narrative. It is only because early commentary traditions often began by identifying the multi-named individuals of ancient texts that we have any hope of knowing who is meant.

In online readings, every attempt has been made to simplify the naming problem by substituting a consistent name for an individual who was referred to by many names. This has not always been possible, however. For example, in the collection of Confucius's conversations included here, there are instances where the text refers to Confucius's disciple Zigong. Zigong was this disciple's "courtesy name," a rather formal term appropriate for use by the editors of the text, who revered him as a great man. Confucius, however, called this man "Si," which was his personal name, the one intimate friends and family used (his family name was Duanmu, so his full name would have been Duanmu Si). Thus when Confucius is quoted addressing Zigong, the name Si appears in the text. For our purposes, in passages where the two names occur in sequence, the courtesy name is compounded to Zigong Si (a form that never appears in Chinese) for the sake of clarity.

You should assume that in every case, *the surname precedes the personal name*. Sometimes a surname will have two syllables and the personal name one (e.g., Sima Qian); much more often the surname is a single syllable and the personal name two (Dong Zhongshu) or both will be one syllable. If the second component of a name appears as "-zi," it generally is not a name but an honorific, "Master," as in Confucius's Chinese name, Kongzi: Master Kong.

